DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 040 SP 038 322

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TITLE Creating "Good" Graduate Students: A Model for Success.
PUB DATE 1998-11-05
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, November 3-6, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Graduate Students; Graduate Study; *Graduation; Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; *Student Needs

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed what graduate student assistants believed they needed to persevere and graduate. Most participants were graduate students serving assistantships at the University of Alabama in 1998. The Graduate Student Services Survey was mailed to 1,150 students, and 144 responded. The survey collected information on demographics, employment status, time spent on campus, involvement in the Graduate Student Association, interest in resources for graduate students, preferred form of communication, and interest in workshops, research expositions, and social activities. Data analysis indicated that most of the students were employed. Most did not feel a need for tutoring. About 30 percent desired to attend workshops on thesis and dissertation writing, computer training, writing a vita or resume, grant writing, and financial aid. About half of the students were interested in research expositions, conferences, and forums where their research could be presented. About 35 percent were interested in informational resources regarding financial aid, research and travel support funding, library resources, writing a thesis or dissertation, employment resources, and student insurance. The results suggest a great need for information and resources for the general population of graduate students. The paper proposes a model representing programs, services, and resources for graduate student retention, satisfaction, and completion. (Contains 48 references.) (SM)

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ED 428 040

Creating "Good" Graduate Students: A Model for Success

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Presented at
MSERA Annual Meeting
New Orleans, Louisiana
November 5, 1998

SP038322

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Abstract

Though it may be difficult to define the qualities of a "good" graduate student, most institutions equate retention and degree attainment with successful students. Research indicates that the graduate student environment and support structure are essential to providing elements that lead to graduate student retention and completion of graduate programs.

This project is a pilot study that analyzes the results of a survey completed by 141 graduate assistants at a large, southeastern research university. The survey results indicate what graduate assistants believe they need to persevere and graduate. The purpose of the study is to create a model for graduate student support based on what graduate students believe they need, what the university is currently offering, and what research indicates is needed.

The survey included questions on demographics; employment status; time spent on campus; involvement in the Graduate Student Association; interest in workshops, research expositions, and social activities; interest in resources for graduate students; and the preferred form of communication. At least 30% of the respondents indicated the desire to attend workshops on thesis and dissertation writing; computer training; writing a vita or resume; grant writing; and financial aid. Approximately 50% were interested in research expositions, conferences, and forums where their research could be presented. At least 35% were interested in informational resources regarding the following: financial aid; research and travel support funding; library resources; writing a thesis or dissertation; employment resources; and student insurance.

It can be inferred that students who are requesting information on services or resources have not satisfactorily received this information through current channels. Based upon the results of the survey, what is currently offered by the university, and current research, a model representing programs, services, and resources for graduate student retention, satisfaction, and completion is proposed.

What makes a "good" graduate student? Obviously different opinions exist, however there are arguably certain general characteristics inherent in most successful graduate students. These characteristics include an intuitive mastery of their field, an understanding of how their field and their research relate to other fields, and an ability to successfully communicate this information to both those in their field as well as those who are not. "How is it that good graduate students are formed?" is a much more difficult question to answer. According to research, the graduate student environment and support structure are essential to instilling the qualities needed by graduate students that ultimately lead to retention of students and degree attainment (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Boyle & Boice, 1995; Evans, 1996; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Katz, 1995; Lipschutz, 1993; Nerad & Cerny, 1993).

"The two main things that make graduate school hard are the unstructured nature of the process, and the lack of information about what you should spend your time on" (desJardines, 1994). As stated by another author, *"tacit knowledge is often transmitted through informal networks, such as old boy networks"* (Boyle & Boice, 1995). As these statements suggest, there are difficulties that exist within graduate programs that are much broader in scope and more nebulous than the intense course work. There is information that graduate students need to know but don't know to ask and are not informed through their advisor or other faculty sources. Therefore it is imperative that a support structure exists at the university level that provides academic and personal support and information in a formalized setting. This paper is a pilot study that analyzes the results of a survey completed primarily by graduate assistantships at a large, southeastern university. It proposes a model of graduate student services that provides the support and assistance needed to ensure "good" graduate students and an environment conducive of retention and completion. The intent is to be both prescriptive and to raise

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awareness on both sides of the institution-student relationship as to what the expectations are for this relationship and how to accomplish the ultimate goal of graduate degree attainment.

METHOD

The majority of participants in the study were graduate students serving in assistantship positions at the University of Alabama during the spring semester of 1998. A small percentage of students who were not currently serving in assistantships but who received their mail via the campus mail system were also surveyed. All 1,150 graduate students with campus mail addresses were selected for the study. The Graduate Student Services Survey was mailed via campus mail to each student's departmental campus mailbox.

SURVEY RESULTS

Of the 1,150 students who received a survey, 12.52% (144 students) responded. The complete demographic characteristics of the sample of students responding to the survey are included in the appendix. The average age was 29.5 with the majority working towards either a Masters degree (70 students or 48.6%) or a Doctoral degree (68 students or 47.2%). The marital status of participants included 61.8% (89) single, 34% (49) married, and 4.2% (6) divorced. No respondents were classified as either separated or widowed. Nearly half (46.5%) of the respondents were enrolled in 9 hours of course work. Of the remaining students, most were enrolled in either six (20.8%) or twelve (23.6%) hours. Considering that the largest majority of graduate students who receive their mail via campus mail are also graduate assistantships, it was expected that those responding would be employed. The results of the survey confirmed this assumption with 84.7% (122 students) employed at the

time of survey completion. Exactly three-fourths of respondents worked part-time and nearly 10% worked full-time. Over 85% of the respondents do **not** commute to school from outside Tuscaloosa. Of those who do, the majority have at least a 45 minute drive. As expected at the graduate level, the majority of students were on-campus five (27.8%), six (22.9%), or seven (32.6%) days every week.

In addition to basic demographics, the survey included questions relating to support, resources, and information at the graduate level. Nearly 95% did not need tutoring in any subject. Although all graduate students are members of the Graduate Student Association by default, 80.6% (116 students) stated that they were not members. Eleven sample workshops were listed and students were asked to check those that they would most likely attend. The top five (all of which received a response of at least 30%) included (in rank order from most votes to least votes): thesis and dissertation writing; computer training; writing a vitae or resume; grant writing; and financial aid for graduate students. Approximately 50% were interested in research expositions, conferences, and forums where their research could be presented. Just slightly less interest (45.8%) was expressed in involvement in social activities.

Of 22 informational resources, respondents were asked to check all sources of which they were interested in. The following categories, all of received a response of at least 35%, are listed in rank order from most votes to least votes: financial aid for graduate students (loans, grants, fellowships, tuition deferment, BAMA plan); research and travel support funds for graduate students; library resources, what's offered in the UA library system, how to find it and how to use it; writing a thesis or dissertation; employment resources on and off campus; and student insurance. Only 42.4% of students responding had ever attended the graduate student orientation. Email was by-far the most preferred method of

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communication. Nearly 90% stated that email would be the best way to get a message to them so they would actually see it and read it.

In analyzing the descriptive statistics, it should be remembered that the majority of those completing the survey were serving as assistantships at the university and worked closely with faculty and staff. By doing so, it would be assumed that these students are also more knowledgeable about the resources available on campus. Considering that 80% of assistants did not know they were members of the GSA, it can then also be assumed that this number is even greater for students not serving as assistants—who are therefore in less contact with faculty and staff. **This illustrates the point that there is a great need for information and resources for the general population of graduate students**. It can be assumed that students who are requesting information on specific services or resources have not satisfactorily received this information. This reveals the opportunity that exists for improvements in the level and type of support for graduate students as well as the opportunity to increase the awareness of resources for graduate students through improved channels of communication. By doing so, satisfaction by the graduate student population will increase which has been shown leads to increased retention and completion.

MODEL

Graduate students must adjust to a rigorous and sometimes burdensome course work schedule, large volumes of reading material, extensive paper writing, and acquirement of research techniques and skills (Adams, 1993). Based upon research, there are a number of services and resources that can be provided that make the transition from undergraduate to graduate school, as well as the duration of a student's graduate program, easier and less fraught with frustrations. The following model does not claim to be all encompassing nor

does it claim to work for every institution. It does, however, represent programs, services, and resources that generally have been found beneficial in graduate student retention, satisfaction, and completion.

[Insert model about here]

Pre-Graduate School Education

Advance planning and foresight are important before jumping into a graduate program—for both the long-term goals of the student *and* the institution. Considering the alarming attrition rate estimates—40-50% of all students, 30% for National Science foundation fellowship recipients, and 60-70% of all African American and Latino students (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Boyle & Boice, 1995; Brown et. Al, 1994; Chapman & McCauley, 1993; Oliver & Brown, 1988; and Sowell, 1989)—students need a clear purpose of why they want to attend graduate school and an even clearer understanding of what graduate school entails and the sacrifices that are made as a graduate student. Contact by the student with schools and faculty members is important to see if the student's ideals and the ideals of the institution and faculty mesh.

Institutions can assist students in understanding what graduate school is through graduate school fairs and seminars. The Graduate School at the University of Alabama hosts a workshop at least once each month that covers the process of how to apply to graduate school. A number of Graduate Student Associations around the country host informal Q&A seminars and socials for undergraduates who are interested in applying to graduate school.

Orientation

It is essential that new graduate students have an orientation program designed for their needs. Research conducted with undergraduates, new faculty, and managers-in-training have found that a relationship exists between early experiences and later persistence, satisfaction, and productivity (Boyle & Boice, 1995; Boice, 1993; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; London & Bray, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Considering that most graduate students have spent at least four years in college, it is often incorrectly assumed that graduate students need little direction upon entering graduate school. In many instances, graduate students received their undergraduate degree from a different institution and are unfamiliar with their graduate campus. It is more often the case that graduate students need just as much orientation, direction, and information as incoming freshmen—just at a different level. The University of Alabama provides a general graduate student orientation program for all new graduate students that addresses the resources and services available through many of the campus departments. The orientation also offers concurrent breakout sessions that provide greater detail on such things as applying for various forms of financial aid and how to cope with the stressors of graduate school. One California institution provides information on the stages of an advanced degree and encourages students to take time as they begin their program to clarify their reasons for attending graduate school (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Financial Needs

The lack of financial support has been noted as a major factor in late attrition in graduate students (Nerad & Miller, 1996). It is therefore important that graduate students understand the financial aspects of graduate school before they begin as well as financial

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options that exist throughout their program. *"The ability to formulate a realistic financial plan for four to six years of graduate work often means the difference between success and failure in obtaining the doctorate"* (Adams, 1993). Graduate student indebtedness is a problem that is reaching epidemic proportions therefore it is imperative that options other than loans (including fellowships, assistantships, and scholarships) be communicated and available to graduate students. The Graduate School at the University of Alabama produces a comprehensive manual entitled *Graduate Student Financial Assistance Handbook* that provides information on scholarships, fellowships, and assistantships available in the departments and colleges on campus as well as a list of publications that provide information on resources nationwide.

Mentoring

An increase in "formal" mentoring programs of students and faculty on many university campuses began because of concerns of the progress and attrition of minority students. The barriers that face many minority students, of which are addressed through successful mentoring programs, include: feelings of rejection; feelings of being isolated culturally; confusion over academic goals; frustration due to an institutional environment of bureaucracy; and an academic culture reflective of Western white male ideals and values (Fleming, 1984; Pascarella, 1980; Terrell & Hassell, 1994; Terrell & Wright, 1988; Tinto, 1987; Wilson, 1994; Wunsch, 1994). Although these barriers have traditionally been linked to minority students, many graduate students experience the same roadblocks. A graduate student mentoring program can address these concerns and help ensure a quality academic graduate experience (James, 1989; O'Brien, 1988; Paratore, 1984). Activities which have been cited as successful in mentoring programs include: sharing quality time through participation in on and off campus events; orienting the protégé to the resources of the

institution (Fagenson, 1988); allowing the protégé to shadow the mentor; tutoring academic areas; acting as a resource for how to survive graduate school; and providing career advice (Terrell & Hassell, 1994; Wilson, 1994).

A number of studies cite a commitment of time for both mentor and protégé as a key ingredient and those who do not meet regularly with specific goals fail to make progress or achieve satisfactory mentoring relationships (Boice, 1992; Wunsch & Johnsrud, 1992). A number of other areas have also been defined in maintaining a mentoring program at the university level. These include administrative support (Johnsrud, 1994) and short and long term assessment (Wilson, 1994).

Although the value of or the need for mentoring has not been confirmed empirically, much anecdotal evidence exists through personal accounts and reflective insights that confirm mentoring components as essential ingredients in student retention and matriculation (Bonilla, Pickron, & Tatum, 1994; Chattergy, 1994; Stanley, 1994).

Graduate students mentored by faculty benefit from mentoring relationships by being availed of information on departmental politics, various rules and regulations, unspoken policies, and faculty (Brown, 1985; Kogler-Hill, Bahniuk & Dobos, 1989; Phillips, 1979); increasing productivity in publishing (Cronan-Hillix, T., Gensheimer, Cronan-Hillix, W., & Davidson, 1986); developing professional skills (Bova & Phillips, 1984); securing academic positions (Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1981; Cameron, 1978); and networking (Moore, 1982). Peer relationships are also an important source of support and encouragement for students in graduate programs (Cesari, 1990). As stated in Bonilla et. al. (1994, p. 111-112), "the major difference [between peer mentoring and traditional faculty-graduate student mentoring] lies in the power and status relationship of the faculty-student relationship versus the equality inherent in the peer mentoring relationship… In a peer

mentoring relationship… students meet as equals and are free to interact and communicate without any need to defer to each other."

Seminars & Workshops

Seminars and workshops can serve to bridge the gap between course material and becoming a successful graduate student. As stated in the introduction, there is information that graduate students need to know but don't know to ask and are not informed through their advisor or other faculty sources. Although much of this information can be addressed through an orientation, there is too much information to be effectively retained by a new student. In addition, there is information that is necessary throughout the graduate school career that may seem irrelevant or not applicable during the beginning stages. This type of grapevine knowledge and unspoken information can be professionally and effectively addressed through workshops and seminars.

For example, seminars hosted for graduate students at the University of Alabama include topics addressing quality of life issues such as: Managing Your Time in Graduate School; Negotiating Graduate School (And Successfully Managing the Hurdles); Surviving Graduate School with a Family; and Managing Stress. Topics addressing academic-related issues include: Completing a Thesis or Dissertation; First Steps in Writing a Research Grant; How to Set Up a Good Research Project; Professional Publications: Options & Procedures; How to Present Your Research Results; Effective Presentations; and Preparing a Resume or Curriculum Vita.

Publications

Publications and regular written communication with graduate students and graduate faculty are integral tools in moving beyond *"tacit knowledge [that] is often transmitted through informal networks, such as old boy networks"* (Boyle & Boice, 1995). A newsletter published once each semester for graduate students at UC-Berkeley covers topics such as the agenda for a first year graduate student, qualifying exams, and professionalism. Berkeley has also produced an academic publishing guide for humanities and social sciences doctoral students. A guide entitled *Easing the Way for Graduate Students* is distributed to department chairs, head graduate advisors, graduate assistants, and department student associations that provides activities that help support graduate students at various stages of their program (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Similar measures are in place at the University of Alabama. Publications include a newsletter published at least once each semester by the office of Graduate Student Services which includes information on upcoming workshops and research opportunities for graduate students; important resources for graduate students; and services geared specifically toward graduate students. The Graduate School at the University of Alabama produces a number of publications for graduate students including *A Manual for Students Preparing Thesis and Dissertation*, *Graduate Student Financial Assistance Handbook*, *Graduate School Prospectus*, and the *Graduate Assistant Guide*. With the increasing number of students accessing information via the world wide web, many of the publications and handbooks are also available through the university's website.

Research Activities

Immersion in research activities has been found to be a predictor of success for doctoral students (Boyle & Boice, 1995; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). The first annual **Graduate Student Research Exposition** was held at the University of Alabama in the spring of 1997. This allowed graduate students to view their research in comparison to peers, gain a better understanding of the breadth and scope of research conducted at the graduate level, and gain experience in presenting their research. As noted by the survey, the majority of graduate students are interested in additional research activities. Events planned for the coming school year include: the continuation of the Research Exposition with the addition of visual and performing arts and presentations as well as poster exhibits; university-wide promotion of research presentations conducted within individual colleges or departments; and a workshop series that is aimed at increasing graduate student research ability.

Faculty Involvement

Departmental climate is a factor *in "coloring students' perceptions of the doctoral experience"* and can lead to attrition. Departments categorized as *"chilly"* environments where students were given the impression that they were wasting faculty time or received few expressions of concern about personal and/or professional advancement *"often exacerbated other difficulties and contributed to [the student's] decision to withdraw from the university."* This was an especially prominent attrition factor for women (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

The National Research Council rates university departments and reports departmental climate information in the Chronicle of Higher Education. *"The top rated climate has a particular climate as created by administrative events"* which included 42 informal social events

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for faculty and students, three weekly opportunities for interaction between faculty and incoming students and a weekly dinner hosted by each faculty member with invitations extended only to first year students where at faculty present their research interests and current projects. In addition to informal events, incoming students were assigned to one large office which assisted in a cohesive group and encouraged interaction and study between the students. Students are assigned advisors based on similar research interests and are quickly immersed in intense research. Most students had daily contact with their advisors and an open door policy existed. As seen in these top departments, the departmental climate directly influenced both the social management and regimen that may be the most important factors for first year graduate students.

In contrast, lowest rated departments sponsored only one informal interaction with faculty, did not provide a central office for incoming students which resulted in a *"lack of collegial spirit,"* the students were not assigned individual advisors during their first year, and scholarly research activity was not expected to begin in either the first or second year of the student's program (Boyle & Boice, 1995).

Avoiding the ABD Syndrome

The dissertation writing stage is a critical period during which many students need assistance and encouragement to complete the task. To increase persistence, retention, and degree attainment, there is an emphasis on providing social interaction, incorporation of a cohort structure, developing a sense of collegiality, and encouraging collaboration (Brien, 1992; Hodges, 1992, Iannone, 1992; Papalewis& Minnis, 1992; Sheridar., Byrne, & Quina, 1989; Tinto, 1988; Trow, 1988). According to a 1995 study of 108 doctoral students, cohesiveness and persistence were found to be significantly correlated ($r=.77$; $p<.01$) (Dorn,

Papalewis, & Brown, 1995). As stated by Dorn et. al. (1995), "this positive relationship supports the theory that commitment to group and commitment to task [in this case, earning the degree] are highly interdependent aspects of the doctoral experience." This type of structure can be found in a Dissertation Support Group that helps prevent students from feelings of being overwhelmed and provides an avenue for valuable material and resources. "In the spirit of collaborative/collegial work, a dissertation support group can offer systematic assistance to fellow graduate students (beyond their supervising committees' input) by aiding them to remain mentally focused and physically on task" (Evans, 1996). Such a group was organized at the University of Alabama during the fall of 1998. It is interdisciplinary with members ranging from Foreign Language Education to Biophysics.

Additional avenues that can be pursued to assist students in the dissertation process include dissertation workshops. UC-Berkeley hosts 12 day-long dissertation writing workshops that include tips on time management; where to begin and how to keep going; moving from research to writing to editing and revising to completion; organizing, outlining, setting realistic goals and tasks; and strategies for an effective working relationship with the dissertation advisor. Similarly, the University of Alabama hosts *Thesis & Dissertation Writing Workshops* twice each year.

Berkeley also conducts three-day, off-campus interdisciplinary dissertation retreats which bring together students who are working on research with similar themes but in different disciplines. This helps *"break the sense of isolation that so often attends the dissertation writing experience, precipitate the formation of a cross-disciplinary intellectual community that endures beyond the workshop, and provide a fresh impetus for completing the work that students may have begun to think irrelevant or doomed to failure."* Due to the limited number of students who can attend these retreats, the university maintains a website database of abstracts which allows students to

locate students in other disciplines who are working on related topics and to initiate their own writing groups (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Communication

The elements that have been introduced in this study cannot operate without the essential factor of communication. Communication is the purse that carries the model. Without it, they are individual elements that may or may not be utilized. Offering the best services and resources will do little good for graduate students if they do not realize the can take advantage of them. A regular publication or newsletter to students and faculty, word-of-mouth, and press releases in the student newspaper are all elements that communicate the message to the target audience. In the model for raising a good graduate student, communication is the yeast.

CONCLUSION

Although great strides have been made, an opportunity exists at many institutions to increase graduate student support in a number of ways. As evidenced in the results of the survey investigated, there can be a lack of communication between the student and the institution that can lead to a lack of information and an environment of unknowing. Through pre-information, orientation, publications, mentoring, and thesis and dissertation support groups, support for graduate students increase thereby leading to greater satisfaction, retention, and completion.

Creating Good Graduate Students: A Model for Success

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